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ABSTRACT

A term-project assignment for a course in phonetics for prospective teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) is described. The project involves six steps: (1) identification of a specific pronunciation problem for study: (2) analysis of the problem: (3) development of a self-instructional program: (4) recording the program on audio-tape: (5) evaluation of the taped program: and (6) regular progress checks with the instructor. The tapes are kept by the department for use with specific pronunciation problems of individual students. In addition to increasing the department library, the projects provide the students with experience in laboratory exercises and construction of remedial exercises. A transcript of a term-project on "can" and "can't" is included. (AMH)

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A Multi-Purpose Program of Teacher Education:

Oral Communication

J. Donald Bowen

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Presumptuous as the above title may sound, it actually represents a modest effort with limited aims--an assignment for a professional course in phonetics or pronunciation for the teacher of English as a second or foreign language. The course syllabus for English 103-K (Phonetics for Teachers of English as a Second Language) specifies the usual activities, readings, discussions, reports, lectures, demonstrations, tutorial assignments, and term project. It is the term project that will be described in this short paper.

The project is multi-purpose. It is designed and intended to involve the student in a number of related activities which, if successfully carried out, will provide highly relevant educational experience. If done carefully it will also provide a useful product to add to the collection of software for the department's Media Center. Specifically, each native English-speaking student in the class (the course has been sectioned to provide separate instruction for native and non-native students in the TESL program) is given the following instructions:[1]

1. Identify a specific pronunciation problem associated with a particular language (but Non-English) background, perhaps from the foreign student you are tutoring for this course, or from your prior experience with learners of English as a second language.

2. Analyze and rationalize the problem--explain how and why the problem arises, and explore ways of correcting the difficulty.

3. Develop a program that will help students improve their handling of the problem you have selected and explained. Your program should be so designed that it is self-sufficient and can be presented without immediate help from a teacher or tutor. Also, if possible, design your presentation not to need specific supplementary visual materials (pictures, spellings, example sentences, or worksheets).

4. Record your program on audio tape. Remember it must be self-explanatory--complete without any help from a teacher. This tape is to be submitted as your term project, and will be retained by the Department.

5. The evaluation of your taped program will be made on the basis of pedagogical relevance and technical quality.

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a) Pedagogical standard: clear, easily understood directions that inform the student what he should know and do, and through guidance and practice should lead to improved performance.

b) Technical quality: clear, easily comprehensible presentation, appropriate tempo and timing (not so fast that it frustrates and not so slow that it bores), free of background line noise, switch clicks, or other electronic or physical distractions.

6. Check each step of your progress with the instructor. The following schedule is suggested. (As listed here, the reference number assumes an academic quarter of 10 weeks. The first figure indicates the week, the second indicates the day of the week: Tuesday or Thursday.)

a)	Identification of the problem	4.1
b)	Analysis and rationalization	5.1
c)	Tapescript for program	7.2
d)	Recording and editing	9.1
e)	Submission	10.1

When the student meets with the course instructor, he is given as much help as he needs and wants. This exercise is not a test, but rather an experience the student and teacher share; they work together to achieve the best result possible given the time constraints, availability and quality of equipment, etc.

Many of the students in the phonetics course have had no prior experience with the design, production, or use of laboratory materials. Some have not had physical contact with a tape recorder or playback equipment. Most make their recordings with a cassette recorder, which, in addition to the likely prospect of limited technical quality, allows no opportunity to edit and improve the raw recording. If possible, students should be encouraged to record with an open reel machine, polish the product by editing out undesirable noises, improve the timing, make corrections by re-recording weak or erroneous segments of the tape. Then, when suitably refined, it can be copied on a cassette for convenient use.

Most of the tapes submitted are voiced in English; presumably these are for advanced, or at least intermediate, students, who can profitably work in English. Some lessons, those designed for low-level or beginning students are voiced in Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, Japanese, etc., so the materials can reach and benefit the student with very limited capability in English.[2] If the class instructor knows the foreign language in which the tape is to be recorded, he can monitor the production. If he doesn't speak the language at a high level, perhaps a colleague does, and he can seek help and advice. If other possibilities are not feasible, he can arrange

for a back translation of the foreign-language text and compare it with the original English.

As the library of materials grows, it will be increasingly possible to send students with a specific problem to the language lab for "individual instruction," especially to alleviate problems that are limited to students with specific background languages. An example is the absence of the /p/ sound in Arabic, where the /p ~ b/ contrast is surprisingly difficult. Rather than use class time for such idiosyncratic needs, the Arabic-speaking students can go to the lab, listen to an appropriate tape, then report back to the teacher during office hours, where the teacher can ask the student what he learned, check any effect that the tape has had on student performance, and plan any additional activity needed.

Since the lesson is individualized and privately heard by the student, he can relisten to any part that he doesn't fully understand, and of course he may rehear the lesson as many times as he wishes. In this way he paces himself--the most promising prospect for meaningfuliy individualized instruction. Also he can formulate questions to ask his instructor if this seems advisable.

The student who develops the lesson will have to come to terms with the language laboratory. Most important, he will have to understand the limitations of a lesson where judgmental feedback is not possible. It is certain that the laboratory student cannot be expected to judge the quality of his own work. If he can, he doesn't need the lesson. This doesn't mean there can be no feedback at all, just that some procedures are not possible. For instance you can't present a minimal pair, such as vote ~ boat, and expect the student to use "vee" to identify vote and "bee" to identify boat. How can the student or his teacher be assured of a correct identification when the key to the difference is another minimal pair with the same problem. Nor does it seem productive to propose identification of two-member comparisons as being the same or different. This activity invokes no real-life use of language, so no association with reality is possible. The contrast must carry meaning for the student and be used to identify similar but minimally different utterances; to do this the contrast should be contextualized.

I recommend two kinds of evaluation activity. The first is minimal-pair sentences, which are identified by a paraphrase of their contrastive meanings:

He says he'll get out the vote. (politician)

He says he'll get out the boat. (sailor)

A similar example would be the identification of Ann or Anna in a sentence like: "Is _____ over the flu?" The two flu-ridden girls could be distinguished by some kind of memory device, say a last name that begins with the same letter that the first name ends with:

(Ann) Nelson

(Anna) Adams

Or, if this seems too much like unnecessary manipulation, the two could be identified by saying or writing "Ann" or "Anna," since in isolated production there is no great difficulty distinguishing the two names.

The second can be called a congruence drill. The student hears a sentence and judges it as an appropriate or inappropriate utterance. For example, he may hear:

He fell out of the vote and nearly got drowned.

This sentence is noncongruent (to be judged "wrong," marked "X," or in some suitable way rejected). Had the sentence employed "boat" instead of "vote," it would have been judged congruent, "OK," or "✓," etc.

Once a proper paraphrase (relevant, clear, short, easily distinguished, etc.) is devised, the learner can react to a spoken drill sentence, marking his own judgments on a piece of paper he himself provides. For a minimal pair he must identify what he hears, for a congruence judgment he must react, choosing according to probabilities of interpretation, whether or not the sentence is acceptable. After a series of sentences, to which the student reacts (on paper) with a written answer, the tape itself can provide the correct answers, so the learner will know if his performance is acceptable or needs improvement.

This series of potentially creative ideas (selecting, defining, analyzing, prescribing, producing, and evaluating) all contribute to a taped lesson that will be an effective aid, an individualized instructional tool, which can be used over and over again for any student who needs the kind of special help that the tape provides.

What if the same problem is proposed more than once? No difficulty: If both are good tapes, save them both (cassettes take up very little space). If one is decidedly inferior, throw it into the bin for other laboratory use. In this way the quality of the collection improves over the years. And as most teachers acknowledge the scarcity of good materials for laboratory use, a successful tape production program helps in a small way to solve the general problem of software.

Students invariably ask how long their tape should be, though this question tapers off somewhat when there's a library collection in the Media Center, where earlier projects can be heard and considered as precedent-setting. It is not very satisfying to the students to be told that the problem of length is comparable to a woman's skirt: long enough to cover the subject and short enough to be interesting. I usually advise somewhere between 10 and 25 minutes--no longer (if the problem needs more time, it is probably two or more problems).

The instructor of the phonetics course will have to give a course grade. This should not discourage him from offering all the help the student may want or need. He should willingly help the students with advice, ideas, etc., even helping by editing, voicing, recording. The improved product may be a source of satisfaction to both course teacher and student. The project will likely be more successful if it is really a joint venture.

From my own experience I can offer a few ideas that hopefully will lead to a better product:

1) Get good voices. The student doesn't have to voice his own tape, if better voices are available.

2) Experiment with microphone settings and positionings.

3) Don't record at a higher level than necessary. To do so runs the risk of picking up extraneous voice in the environment of the recording.

4) Pay careful attention to timing, especially to length of pauses left for listener participation. Leave enough but not too much space. Too little is demoralizing, since the student justifiably assumes he is expected to perform in the time allotted. Too much and the student's mind begins to wander.

5) Provide a meaningful opportunity to get acquainted with the machines and equipment to be used for recording the project. If the school has a language lab, perhaps there is a director or a technician who can visit the class (or have them visit him in the laboratory) to offer instructions, hopefully to initiate the "hands on" policy that will help the student learn how to get the best results out of the equipment.

A rationalized tape-making project can provide a wide variety of experience. Many details of oral production lend themselves to a mini-lesson preparation. Some have been notably successful, and of course can become immediately useful. One example is given below, quoting verbatim the tapescript. It was prepared during spring quarter, 1979, by Mr. Philip Owen, a certificate student in the TESL program at UCLA. I am quoting with his permission.

Tapescript on Term Project

"Can" and "Can't"

This is a lesson on the correct pronunciation of the affirmative and negative forms of the modal auxiliary "can."

[Music: from "Annie Get Your Gun"]

Girl: Anything you can do I can do better. I can do anything better than you.

Boy: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can. Yes, I can.

B: Anything you can be I can be greater. Sooner or later I'm greater than you.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am. Yes, I am. I can shoot a partridge, with a single cartridge.

G: I can get a sparrow, with a bow and arrow.

B: I can live on bread and cheese.

G: And only on that?

B: Yes.

Listen to these two sentences:

I can do it. I can't do it.

I can do it. I can't do it.

These sentences mean very different things. When they are written, the only difference is an apostrophe and a "t" after the word "can". But when they are spoken this distinction may almost disappear. Native English speakers do not listen for the "t" to distinguish these two words in speech. As a non-native speaker, you may be tempted to pronounce these words the same and simply add a "t" onto the negative form. If you do this, you may be misunderstood. People will think you are saying "can't", when in fact you wanted to use the positive form "can" /kæn/.

What then do English speakers listen for? The key to understanding these two words lies in their vowels. Consider this sentence:

He can /kən/ sing well. He can /kən/ sing well.

The word "can" /kən/ is unstressed, and the vowel changes to /ə/. Listen and try to hear the difference in vowel sound:

can /kən/	can't /kǽnᵗ/
I can /kən/ do it.	I can't /kænᵗ/ do it.

The vowel in the negative word is the full, or the stressed form, pronounced /æ/. The vowel in the positive form has changed to /ə/. We say that it has "reduced" because it loses its stress.

Now let's try a little exercise to find out if you have already caught on. Number from one to seven on your paper. Now listen to this story. I'm going to give a party, and I've invited seven people. Some of them will come to the party and some will not. I'll tell you who will come and who won't. You write "yes" or "no" on your paper next to the number of the sentence I read. For example, if I say "Max can't come to the party," you write "no". Now let's start.

1. Judy can come to the party.
2. John can't come to the party.
3. Pam can come to the party.
4. David can come to the party.
5. Mary can't come to the party.
6. Bob can come to the party.
7. Jack can't come to the party.

You should have said that numbers 2, 5, and 7 are <u>not</u> coming to the party. The others <u>are</u> coming.

If you got six of the seven in this exercise correct, you probably don't need to listen to the rest of this tape. Just remember to reduce the vowel in "can" unless it is at the end of the sentence or for some reason emphasized.[3] If you are not careful about this, other people might think that you cannot go to the party, when you would really like very much to go.

If you want more practice, keep listening.

[Musical Interlude]

Girl: Anything you can do I can do better. I can do anything better than you.

Boy: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can. Yes, I can.

B: Anything you can be I can be greater. Sooner or later I'm greater than you.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am. Yes, I am.

[Part Two]

Remember that unless it comes at the end of a sentence, the modal auxiliary "can" is usually not stressed. Therefore, we change the vowel sound from /æ/ to /ə/. Let's try some other sentences to see if you can pick up the clues that distinguish "can" /kən/ from "can't" /kæn^{t}/. None of the illustrative sentences that follow have "can" /kæn/ or "can't" /kæn^{t}/ at the end of a sentence, so look for the clues that any proficient speaker will use: The vowel will be short and the sound will be changed from /æ/

to /ə/. That is, if it is positive. It will be longer and /æ/ will be retained if the sentence is negative. Number your paper from one to eight. This time write a plus sign if the sentence is positive, and a minus sign if the sentence is negative. Ready? I'll say each sentence only once.

1. We can drive to my house in three hours.
2. He can't help you.
3. Can't you go to the store for me?
4. Can she help me with my homework?
5. He can help you.
6. Can't she help me with my homework?
7. Can you go to the store for me?
8. We can't drive to my house in three hours.

You should have written "plus" for the sentences numbered 1, 4. 5, and 7, minus for the other numbers.

You may have noticed that four of the sentences were questions, and that they began with the word "can" /k n/ or "can't" /k n /. This placement does not affect the pronunciation of the words.

But sometimes both "can" /kən/ and "can't" /kæn^{t}/ appear in the same sentence. For instance:

I can /kən/ help you, but she can't /kæn^{t}/.

This example is just like the sentences we saw before, except that the two words we're studying are used in a compound sentence.

But suppose we turn this example around and say:

I can't /kæn^{t}/ help you, but she can /kæn/.

I can't /kæn^{t}/ help you, but she can /kæn/.

In this case the word "can" /kæn/ comes at the end of the sentence. Therefore, it will be stressed and the vowel will be pronounced /æ/. It will also be pronounced longer than the negative form "can't" /kæn^{t}/. Listen to these sentences:

I can't sing, but she can.

I can't sing, but she can.

Bob can't dance, but I can.

Bob can't dance, but I can.

The vowels in "can" /kæn/ and "can't" /kænᵗ/ sound the same but the vowel of the positive form is drawn out longer than the negative one. Listen:

can /kæn/ can't /kænᵗ/

can /kæn/ can't /kænᵗ/

So when you hear a sentence with "can" /kæn/ at the end of it, you have to listen for word length and for context clues to help you know which part of the sentence is positive and which is negative.

Now let's finish this lesson with one more exercise. This time there'll be twelve sentences. Some will be questions, some statements. Number from one to twelve on your paper. Then write "yes" if the sentence is positive, and "no" if the sentence is negative. Each sentence will be read only once. Ready?

1. My sister can type 60 words a minute.
2. I can't help you.
3. English class can be a lot of fun.
4. Can't Johnny tie his shoes?
5. This room can seat a hundred people.
6. Can aspirin cure a headache?

On the first six sentences you should have had these results: Numbers 2 and 4 are negative; the rest are positive. Now let's continue.

7. Johnny can't tie his shoes.
8. Can this room seat a hundred people?
9. Aspirin can usually help a headache.
10. I can help you.
11. Can't you work any faster?
12. My brother can't type 60 words a minute.

For these sentences you should have said that numbers 7, 11, and 12 were negative; the rest were positive.

If you missed more than two of these last twelve sentences, your teacher may want to give you more help with this feature of English pronunciation. But if you missed only one or two, you shouldn't have much of a problem recognizing "can" /kæn ~ kən/ and "can't" /kænᵗ/. But you will have to make a special effort to change your pronunciation to fit this pattern.

When you speak with your English-speaking friends, listen for their pronunciation of "can" /kæn/ or /kən/ and "can't" /kænt/. And remember that if you do not make your vowel sound like native speakers do, you may often be misunderstood. They will think that you said you can't /kænt/ go, when in fact you really meant to say that you can /kæn/.

[Music to End]

G: Anything you can do I can do better. I can do anything better than you.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G. Yes, I can. Yes, I can.

B: Anything you can be I can be greater. Sooner or later I'm greater than you.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am.

G: No, you're not.

B: Yes, I am. Yes, I am. I can shoot a partridge, with a single cartridge.

G: I can get a sparrow, with a bow and arrow.

B: I can live on bread and cheese.

G: And only on that?

B: Yes.

G: So can a rat.

B: Anything you can sing I can sing higher.

G: I can sing anything higher than you.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Oh yes, I can. Anything you can buy I can buy cheaper. I can buy anything cheaper than you.

B: 50¢?

G: 40¢.

B: 30¢.

G: 20¢.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can. Yes, I can.

B: Anything you can say I can say softer.

G: I can say anything softer than you.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can. Yes, I can.

B: I can drink my liquor faster than a flicker.

G: I can do it quicker, and get even sicker.

B: I can open any safe.

G: Without being caught?

B: Sure.

G: That's what I thought. Ya crook!

B: Any note you can hold I can hold longer.

G: I can hold any note longer than you.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.
G: Yes, I can.

B: Yes, you can.

G: Anything you can wear I can wear better. In what you wear I'd look better than you.

B: In my coat?

G: In your vest.

B: In my shoe?

G: In your hat.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can. Yes, I can.

B: Anything you can say I can say faster.

G: I can say anything faster than you.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.
G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.
G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't. No, y-c-c-
G: Yes, I g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-

B: c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-can't.
G: g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-can.

B: I can jump a hurdle.

G: I can wear a girdle.

B: I can knit a sweater.

G: I can fill it better.

B: I can do most anything.

G: Can you bake a pie?

B: No.

G: Neither can I.

B: Anything you can sing I can sing sweeter.

G: I can sing anything sweeter than you.

B: No, you can't.

G: Oh yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Oh, yes I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't.

G: Yes, I can.

B: No, you can't, can't, can't.

G: Yes, I can, can, can.

B) No, you can't.
G) Yes, I can.

[End of Tape]

The lesson on can/can't was prepared spring quarter 1979. It illustrates how a viable and useful lesson can be built on a highly restricted area of pronunciation; the morphophonemics of two words. It is prepared for intermediate students, has a running time of 14 minutes 10 seconds. Can/can't is a general problem, and English is the only language used in the tapescript. No materials or equipment are needed for student participation beyond a pen(cil) and a piece of paper. Performance evaluation is self-monitored.

The pedagogical quality of the tape is "excellent", and the technical quality is "excellent-", the minus accounted for by occasional background noise on the tape. No factual errors were noted; however, a little editorial polish would better clarify some of the procedures and descriptions on the tape, to avoid confusion.

The can/can't distinction is worth learning for its own sake; once mastered it can be the touchstone for similar variations in other verbs. This is shown in the second stanza of the song, where some corresponding forms of verb "be" are used: "I'm, Yes I am, Yes you are, No you're not."

The music lends itself remarkably well to the purposes of the lesson. The song lyrics provide no less than 98 examples of can/can't, all fully and meaningfully contextualized, distributed as follows: /kən/, /kæn/ 32, and /kæn^{t}/ 26. The song is an excellent illustration of the truly powerful rule specifying that destressing and a morphophonemica schwa /ə/ are closely related--a very significant rule in English pronunciation.

The title of this article claims that the program described is "multi-purpose". The assignment calls for perception, identification, and analysis of a legitimate language-learning problem; the design and provision of a solution or answer to the problem; the scripting, production, recording, editing, and evaluation of results. Finally the generalization of the principles that emerge from the assignment provides an entree to a method whereby other similar problems can be solved. The manipulation of the concepts listed and the activities involved in this assignment do indeed seem to justify the "multi-purpose" claim.

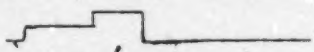
Mr. Owen presumably learned at least one detail of English pronunciation: that it is incredibly difficult to produce a weak-stressed vowel in isolation. Syllable isolation is in fact a "citation form," which is normally strong-stressed. Weak stress customarily occurs when there is a strong stress with which to establish a contrast. To be able to pronounce a weak-stressed vowel in isolation requires a virtuousity not usual in the normal employment of a language. This defect (producing a strong-stressed version when a weak-stressed version has been announced) occurs several times.

Even though very few have managed to produce projects at anywhere near the level of professional quality, I think our graduate students have benefitted from the effort, and the best of their projects will certainly be pedagogically useful to students with specific training needs. The tapes are worthy of the time the project consumes. But along with the physical result, the practice and experience should prove to be useful once the trained teacher is out on his own. From past experience we know our former student may be the only person in his school with any specialized experience that involves laboratory materials and equipment.

NOTES

1 If the student, and this is usual, needs help in diagnosing and explaining, he may find the kind of assistance he needs in Clifford Prator and Betty W. Robinett's Manual of American English Pronunciation, specifically from the Diagnostic Passage, called the Accent Inventory, that accompanies the book, and the instructions for its use.

2 Once complication is getting an English text translated accuragely and meaningfully. Usually the student will arrange for this.

3 An example is contrastive stress:  I can too go tomorrow.